

Is Tibet (really) Chinese?

Review >
Central Asia

Already for some time, Tibet appears to be of substantial interest and concern both to the West and to the Chinese government. Their concern may be substantially different, yet, as many questions are the same, *Le Tibet est-il Chinois? Réponses à cent questions chinoises*, in which Blondeau and Buffetrille and other Tibet specialists take on one hundred existing Chinese questions regarding Tibet would appear a fascinating undertaking.

By Antonio Terrone

Since the annexation of Tibet in 1951, the PRC has faced a continuous series of challenges in its attempt to convince the world of its claim on Tibet. Human rights organizations and Tibet support groups often portray the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policy towards Tibet, and also towards other ethnic groups, as one of crackdowns, intimidation and questionable

modernization, involving a continuous influx of Han Chinese workers. The primary fear of the international community is that the increasing commercialization of Tibet that has accompanied the extensive programme of Chinese investment in the region will simultaneously weaken the attraction of traditional Tibetan culture for Tibetans, while strengthening their loyalty to the economic opportunities that China can increasingly offer. The religious and

ethnic cause of Tibetans has been the main reason for anti-CCP dissent among Tibetans, and has received much international attention in recent decades. In the late 1980s, a booklet in various languages was available at Chinese embassies around the world: *Le Tibet, cent questions et réponses (A Hundred Questions and Answers about Tibet)*, henceforth *Cent Questions*) summarized the official Chinese stance on the status of Tibet.¹ Now, 14 years on, a

team of 15 leading Tibetologists provide their own answers to those questions in *Le Tibet est-il Chinois? Réponses à cent questions chinoises (Is Tibet Chinese? Answers to A Hundred Chinese Questions)*, henceforth *Réponses*.

Edited by Anne-Marie Blondeau and Katia Buffetrille, *Réponses* provides the reader with the necessary background to understand PRC claims and the current comments of Western academics on sensitive issues that span centuries of Sino-Tibetan history, Tibet's economy, religion, culture, human rights situation, demography, and living conditions. The authors of *Réponses* succeed in refuting China's standard historical justification for Tibet's inclusion within the PRC. This is based on the belief that Tibet's theocratic rule and imperial exploitation over the centuries caused great harm and suffering to Tibetans until the People's Liberation Army (PLA) finally 'peacefully liberated' them in 1950. The Chinese argument also suggests that the annexation prevented the total collapse of 'backward' Tibet and set it on the road to modernization, transforming it for the better under CCP rule. *Réponses* is valuable, therefore, in its attempt to clarify the current situation concerning Tibet and Tibetans in the PRC, particularly as a reaction to an overt propagandistic publication such as *Cent Questions*. The book clearly demonstrates how Beijing quickly loses ground with its various historical claims over Tibet. An oversight of *Réponses*, however, paradoxically mirrors a failure of *Cent Questions*.

As government propaganda, *Cent Questions*, not surprisingly, avoids highlighting any weakness in CCP policy in Tibet. Yet *Réponses* not only fails to point this out, but the authors also avoid discussing some of the CCP's shocking policy failures. For example, the harm wrought on Tibet during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), could have been mentioned more than just occasionally in the book and is somewhat overlooked. This point is paramount, because it strikes at the heart of the PRC's position that Beijing's rule has been nothing but beneficial for Tibetans.

Investigating the economic situation, *Réponses* provides a lengthy analysis of the shortcomings of the PRC's policy concerning the development of China's western regions, denouncing the neglect of infrastructure and the massive exploitation of Tibet's natural resources (pp. 300-337). However, little mention is made of the current Golmud-Lhasa railroad project (2001-2007) and its impact on Tibet's environment and economy.² Such improvements in infrastructure and development strategies

are mainly intended to reinforce national unity under the CCP flag. As *Réponses* clearly emphasizes, the fundamental preoccupation of the Chinese government (widely stressed in *Cent Questions*) is the protection of the territorial integrity of the country and the unity of the many ethnic communities of the PRC (pp.171-191).

Indeed, over the past four decades, the official position of the Chinese government on Tibet-related issues has not substantially changed. For the government, the integration of Tibet was fulfilled in 1965 following the creation of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Tibetan nationalist dissent is thus considered to be a threat to the PRC's territorial integrity, rather than a direct threat to CCP leadership over China. It should be remembered, however, that any attempt to reshape China's borders would seriously undermine the legitimacy of the ruling party.

Religion, together with language and culture, are nationalistic elements that the Chinese government is trying hard to keep under tight control. The return of capital punishment for Tibetan political prisoners this January, reminds us that as the Tibetan movement for religious freedom and self-determination gains impetus, the Chinese authorities do not hesitate to apply harsh measures to suppress the Tibetan resistance movement. However, the question remains to what extent the Western powers will be prepared to confront Beijing as Tibet moves up the international agenda. ◀

- Blondeau, Anne-Marie and Katia Buffetrille (eds.), *Le Tibet est-il Chinois? Réponse à cent questions chinoises*, Paris: Albin Michel (2002), pp.468, ISBN 9-782226-134264

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- 1 The authors refer to the French edition. For an online version see www.tibetinfo.com.cn/tibetzn-en/question_e/index.htm Official Chinese information on Tibet, ethnic groups, religious affairs, and Tibet-related issues can be obtained at the authorized government portal site to China www.china.org.cn/english and at the China Tibet Information Centre website www.tibetinfo.com.cn/english
- 2 Office of the Leading Group for Western Region Development of the State Council: www.chinawest.gov.cn/english The State Development and Planning Commission: www.sdpc.gov.cn